

## Highland Community College Commencement

May 14, 2010

President Reist, members of the board of trustees, faculty and staff, parents and graduates, thank you for the kind invitation to join you today. It's good to be back. To the class of 2010: congratulations on your outstanding achievement.

I want to thank the moms and dads with us today who have sacrificed to make this day possible. When your son or daughter graduates from college, it's a wonderful day for your family. If you ask these students who had the most influence on their lives, I bet not one would say "my Congressman." Most likely they would say their parents. Few things in life are more important than our jobs as moms and dads. Parents, thank you for all you have done to help your sons and daughters reach this point in their lives. As your son or daughter takes the next step in their lives – whether continuing their studies or beginning a career, you can take pride in knowing you have helped them take an important step forward. I know the graduates will join me in thanking you for your love and support.

I also want to thank the members of the faculty. Highland is fortunate to have an excellent faculty, who make an impact on students' lives forever – educators who work hard to prepare their students for a successful career or a transition to another college. I understand you are quite talented, because studies have shown that students who transfer from Highland fare so well as transfer students. Your decision to invest in the lives of young people is an honorable one, and I thank you for it. There is no more important, no more noble profession than teaching.

Graduates: over the last few years, you have probably spent a lot of time on this campus. For some of you, this graduation day has been a long time in coming. Many of you have responsibilities beyond school, such as jobs and families to care for, and after today, you will be returning to those jobs full time. Others here are taking the next step forward in your studies. And this evening, some of you are fulfilling the dreams of many generations in your family by becoming the first person to graduate from college. I'd like to congratulate all of you on a job well done.

Your education here at Highland has undoubtedly prepared you well for continuing your studies or beginning a new career. For more than a century, Highland has given Kansans access to affordable higher education. As the first college in Kansas, Highland has earned a reputation for excellence. And that reputation extends beyond your academic programs onto the athletic fields. Congratulations to the Highland softball team who won the district tournament this past weekend in Wichita. Your upcoming trip to the national championship is the first ever for the Scottie softball team and marks only the second time a Highland athletic team has competed in a national tournament. Congratulations and good luck next week!

Beyond the athletic fields, many of you have participated in the outstanding fine arts department here at Highland. Thank you for taking the time to encourage hundreds of area high school students to share their talents in your annual "Art Day" competition. Your participation in that competition is an excellent way to give back to your community and I commend you for that.

And lastly, I want to congratulate the members of the Highland Business Professionals of America teams for your outstanding performance in last week's national competition. The skills you gained through your classes and your involvement in BPA will help you succeed in life. Congratulations on your achievement.

Addressing a class of graduates is a difficult task. It's not always easy to tell people how to live or give them a recipe for guaranteed success. I suppose, in an attempt to make me feel better, people have told me not to worry, because "hardly anyone will be listening and or remember what you said." I'm not sure if that was supposed to be encouraging, but I guess it does make me feel a little better.

Graduates, for the next few minutes, I'd like to visit with you about the road ahead and the choices that lay before you. Whether you are headed to another school or starting a job, you will face many decisions over the next few years. As you weigh these decisions, I want to challenge you to become a person of excellence and character who strives to put others first.

First, commit yourself to becoming a person of excellence in whatever you do, big and small. There is a difference between excellence and perfection. Things will not always turn out to be perfect and that's ok. Perfection has to do with the end product, but excellence has to do with the process. Becoming a person of excellence means you make the most of your God-given talents and abilities.

In high school, I worked part-time with a crew of students to help the school custodian, Scotty Reidel. Scotty made sure that no matter how long it took, our school buildings and athletic fields would be well cared for – down to every last detail. Mopping the floor may not seem like a big deal, but Scotty taught us to do our best in everything, no matter how small the task. So I challenge you to follow the same approach and become a person of excellence in all that you do.

Second, commit yourself to becoming a person of character. Your character in life is shaped by the principles you choose to follow. Honesty, integrity and personal responsibility—are just a few that you should strive to follow as you build your character.

I learned a lot about character from my days as a Boy Scout in Troop 109. I remember an early lesson. I once “found” six pop bottles in our neighbor’s back yard. In those days you could get three cents for empty bottles, so I took them to the grocery store to “cash-in.” But, my parents quickly found out and made me give our neighbors the money for the bottles. I still remember as a seven year old knocking on my neighbor’s door to explain my crime and hand over the eighteen cents.

A lot has changed since those days – the “right” thing to do is not always the most popular thing to do in today’s world. You will be faced with many difficult choices in life and many of them will

test you and your character. But if we are to live meaningful lives and have any hope of addressing today's problems, we must remember that there is a difference between right and wrong. Integrity matters, so I challenge you to become a person of character.

And lastly, commit yourself to serving others. I am convinced that success is not measured by what you get out of life, but by what you give back. We are often told that our country is in need of great leaders. But I believe that what we really need are great servants—people who serve others, not themselves. We need people who put others' needs first and their needs second. I believe that individuals who volunteer their time in churches, neighborhoods and communities can often have the greatest impact and change lives for the better.

I witnessed an incredible example of service in the city of Greensburg, Kansas just a few years ago. In 2007, the town was destroyed by the most powerful tornado to hit the U.S. in eight years. The tornado leveled the entire community, claimed 11 lives and left hundreds homeless. In those difficult times, I saw the best in people. When I walked through Greensburg in the days after the storm, what stood out to me was the outpouring of concern shown by the citizens of Greensburg, by Kansans and by other Americans. Rescue crews, volunteers and donations from nearby towns flowed into Greensburg. In the neighboring community of Haviland, many residents came to buy groceries and when the store owner asked, "Where are you from?" and the answer was Greensburg, the shopkeeper responded "No charge." In Kansas, we help our neighbors by serving one another in good times and hard times.

As a wise teacher once said: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." By helping others, your own lives will be more blessed.

Graduates, in life, each of us has a higher calling. Not just to make a dollar, but to make a difference. Not just to find happiness, but to fulfill a purpose. Remember that no job, regardless of the salary or perks, can take the place of a life committed to a purpose greater than yourself. True success is not marked by your achievements, but by the kind of person you become. And I challenge you to become a person of excellence and character who strives to put others first. I challenge you to make a difference with your life.

I'm sure many of you here today have high hopes and big dreams for your future. You are probably eager to finish the next few years of college so you can jump into the "real world" and build that career. Many of you will probably go on to become successful doctors, lawyers, journalists or even politicians!

Let me tell you a bit about my own experience in life. I'll be the first to tell you that fulfillment in life does not come from one's status or power in Washington.

There is nothing in my background that would suggest that I would grow up to become a Congressman---no financial or political heritage in my family. My Dad worked in the oil fields of Western Kansas and my Mom was the lady you paid your electric bill to in my small hometown. I am a first generation college graduate that happened to find politics and government interesting. So I set a goal of becoming a member of the United States House of Representatives. With the help of many people, I succeeded in reaching that goal fourteen years ago.

Being elected to Congress was something I really wanted and a sense of great satisfaction should have followed my election. Despite my electoral success, something was missing. When we set goals for ourselves, even when that goal is met, we are often left feeling empty and unsatisfied. That's because true satisfaction in life doesn't come with greater success; it comes when you live your life devoted to a greater purpose than yourself. I came to understand that I was not elected to office to meet my own personal goal, but to be of service to others.

I want to share a quote with you I heard recently: My fear for you in your life is not that you will fail – but that you will succeed in the things that ultimately don't really matter. Graduates, remember that what really matters is how you spend your life and what kind of person you become.

The world is a large and wonderful place and it is your moment to step into it. Many opportunities will come your way and regardless of where life takes you – remember where you came from. The way may be uncertain, but you can step forward with confidence as you become a person of excellence and character who impacts the lives of those around you for the better.

Our small voice tells God, "I don't know where we are going."

And God answers: "We are going forward, into the future I have shaped for you."

“But I don’t know where that is”

And God answers: “I do; let’s go.”

“But I am afraid”

And God says: “Of course you are. Any sensible person would be. Let’s go.”

And we say, “But can I do all that is given me to do?”

And God says: “I have made you, I am with you to the end. Take my hand. Let’s go.”

So as you graduate today, “may the Lord bless you and keep you” and may the “Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you.” Congratulations and best wishes to the Class of 2010.